

# Flying towards the unknown

## Operation LIBELLULE (DRAGONFLY)

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*In March 1997, a chaotic situation in Albania required to carry out a contingency evacuation for about 100 German and foreign nationals wanting to leave Tirana, the capital. On March 13, 1997, the German Chancellor tasked the Bundeswehr to carry out this evacuation. NEO (Non Combatant Evacuation Operation) LIBELLULE required six CH-53 helicopters and started on March 14, 1997; it was successfully completed in the very evening and without suffering any losses.*

### A sudden crisis

In March 1997, the domestic political situation in Albania had become out of control, because of fraudulent financial operations in which Government members were also involved. Armed forces were decaying, weapons inventories had been looted, LO (Law and Order) was no longer being enforced, and shooting broke out on streets. No one dared make forecasts about the way this situation would develop in the following days.

The Foreign Affairs Department provided the German embassy in Tirana with guidelines for immediately preparing for German and foreign nationals to leave the country if they wanted to. Afterwards, over 100 German and foreign nationals – who wanted to leave the country – gathered in Tirana. On March 12, the embassy reported to the Foreign Affairs Department that it seemed that no – land, maritime, or civilian air – evacuation was still possible regarding security; and it added that the situation was worsening as far as people's physical integrity was concerned.

On March 13, following a decision-making process in Bonn, **the German Chancellor ordered the Bundeswehr to start the evacuation under national command.** Following this, on March 13 in the evening, an order was given by the *FüZBw* (*Bundeswehr* Operation Center) to the *NatBef.i.E.* (national commander in the Bosnia-Herzegovina theater) to carry out the evacuation out of Tirana on March 14. During the night between the 13 and the 14, a **battalion task force was set up from SFOR German detachments located in the Rajlovac camp** and the NEO was planned. On March 14, in the morning, the battalion task force moved to Dubrovnik. On the same day, at 1900, the operation could be considered as completed once the last helicopter had landed in Dubrovnik, i.e. 20 hours after the written order was received. Less than half an hour was necessary to carry out the evacuation stage - a highly crucial one - in Tirana.

**This operation was carried out successfully** and personnel eligible for evacuation **flew out of the country.** Rifle shooting damaged one helicopter. No people was killed or injured among friendly forces.

### Rajlovac camp, March 13/14, 1997

As regards the SFOR German detachment in the Rajlovac camp, North-West of Sarajevo, March 13, 1997 looked like any other day. Indeed, the headquarters of the theater national command followed the events in Albania that underwent a crisis, but nobody seemed to consider any commitment in this area as a possible option. At that time, **servicemen from the first GECONSFOR (L) contingent** had been in this area for six to ten weeks. They had been carefully selected and they had taken advantage of a comprehensive training in Germany. As regards some servicemen, it was their second, even their third assignment.

**Within the headquarters of the theater national command in Rajlovac, in the FüZBw in Bonn, and in the HFüKdo in Koblenz, the main actors** knew each other to some extent as they had carried out common missions beforehand; they worked closely together and there was a great common confidence. Later on, this feature was to be a critical factor for the operation to succeed.

In the evening, during the briefing that took place at the headquarters of the theater national command, the COS received an urgent telephone call from the *HFüKdo* G3. It announced that the Ministry of Defense intended to **achieve or at least to support a NEO out of Tirana in the coming days, by using assets from the SFOR German contingent**. However, it was impossible – at that time – to know whether this operation was to be carried out or not, whose details and framework were still doubtful.

Relying on this piece of information, the headquarters of the theater national command started to think about it, as a confidential task, with the co-operation of the *HFlgTrpStff* (AAVN (Army Aviation) transportation flight) and of the *Flaz* (CSH (Combat Support Hospital)); it drafted **an initial plan** regarding the size of the force. A few hours later, we had to be prepared to put these assets on alert, which granted us with an important advantage, even a critical one during planning owing to short available time.

In the evening, at about 2145, I personally went to the armored battalion task force, where a so-called «Tirana» warning message from my headquarters was forwarded to me. At 2135, the *HFüKdo* had announced that **a NEO was to be carried out from March 14, at dawn**. An order from the *FüZBw* was declared to be imminent.

**A written order from the *FüZBw* arrived at 2135** in Rajlovac. In the message it was said: “Evacuate German nationals and other nationals out of greater Tirana area”. **An operation instruction from *HFüKdo*** arrived soon after. First, the *HFüKdo* was relieved by the command structure responsible for planning the operation. Simultaneously, I was appointed commander of the battalion task force and relieved from my mission as COS to the theater national commander. My deputy was entrusted with this function; during the night, he coordinated support work for the headquarters very cautiously.

Taking off from Rajlovac was scheduled at 0730 the next day, aiming to reach Dubrovnik in Croatia. Beforehand, we

had to assess the situation, to set up the battalion task force, equip it and prepare it for taking off in order to carry out the mission. Staffing and disseminating orders was to be carried out immediately. In addition to the battalion task force that was set up from Army units located in the Rajlovac camp, two Transall aircraft were provided by the *FüZBw* to transport nationals and one Transall operated as a radio relay; Frigate *Niedersachsen* also operated as a radio relay and was tasked with watching over the airspace. **Detailed planning for the operation started at around midnight** on this basis and it was code-named LIBELLULE. Manpower tasked to prepare for the operation was tied down to secret. And the operation could remain secret until it was completed.

The **OTF (Operational Task Force)** was set up as follows:

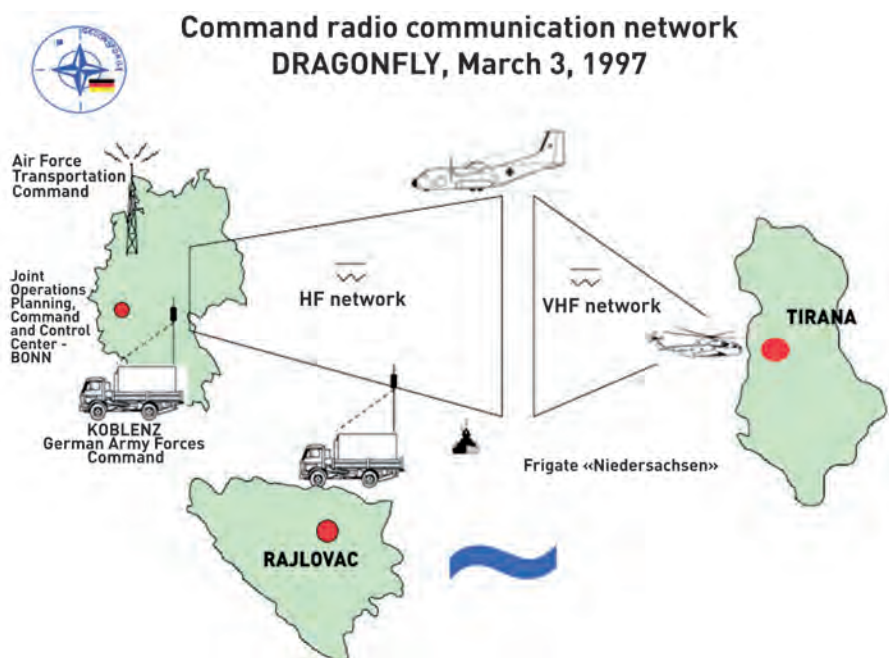
- the **CMD GRP (Command Group)** was set up from the headquarters of the theater national command, on the basis of a 8/5/14 strength;
- six CH-53 helicopters with their aircrews were provided by the **AAVN transport flight**, and;
- technical and geophysical support personnel (17/17/37);
- the CSH and the *StOSanZentrum* (garrison medical unit) made up the **medical component** (9/4/0/13);
- a **security platoon** was set up from

detachments from an armored task force company, with the following strength: 3/10/12/25.

Therefore, the **total strength of the OTF** amounted to 37/36/16/89. Owing to their training, their motivation, their assets, and their availability, units located in the Rajlovac camp were qualified to carry out this contingency mission. Part of the commanders was already accustomed to the basic skills to carry out such an operation. Soldiers worked relentlessly during the whole night. No one endeavored to get out of it. We even had to refuse impulse offers of service from some units. Afterwards, I noticed the same phenomenon in Dubrovnik, when I split the OTF into three detachments; many people demanded to join the Tirana group.

**As regards leadership, no specific problem occurred during this stage.**

During an uninterrupted race against time, we had primarily to solve a large amount of tactical, organizational, and technical issues. Armament and ammunition consisted of G3s, automatic rifles, man-portable AT (Anti-Tank) weapons, grenade pistols, and hand grenades. Survival rations and water were stored on-board. Ready money was provided by the Rajlovac counter and amounted to 100,000 DM and 15,000 dollars; it was divided up among the six aircraft.



On March 14, at 0700, at the Rajlovac point, I presented the OTF to Major General Klaus Frühhaber, theater national commander. Once against, he reminded servicemen of their mission, and admitted that it was hazardous. Then, the OTF boarded the aircraft and prepared for leaving. Therefore, between the moment when the first piece of information announced a likely mission, and the moment when we were ready to take off, just 14 hours had elapsed; and nine hours only since the moment when the very orders were received.

As well, preparing for this operation had to be carried out most urgently. Rigorous planning of the operation had to be combined with the necessity to operate rapidly, due to the situation in Tirana. In these conditions, **it was no longer possible to consider alternate COAs (Courses of Action)**. We nearly had no reserves and no redundancy. Should bones of contention have occurred we would have had to improvise. On the other hand, **scarcely available situation information** mainly compelled us to plan towards the unknown. Therefore, at the moment when we took off from Rajlovac, we were not aware of the location(s) where nationals were, and of the place to which they had to be transported, regardless of the fact that we neither had a city plan nor enough maps.

In-between, **OTF LIBELLULE** had been officially withdrawn from the SFOR detachment by SHAPE, and it had been **attached to national command**. Shortly after 0730, the leading helicopter flew off in a March grey sky and headed to Dubrovnik, leaving Sarajevo aside. The first stage for operation LIBELLULE has started.

## Touching down in Dubrovnik and Podgorica

At 0920, the last aircraft touched down in Dubrovnik. Frigate Niedersachsen had got into contact during the night and entered Albanian coastal waters. **The Dubrovnik airport happened to be quite appropriate for us**, as:

- telecommunications links could be set up immediately ;
- units were fully secured in a rapidly requisitioned area aside the airport;
- accommodation and support were perfectly carried out ;
- we were provided with an efficient and generous support from a small French detachment and the Croatian manpower of the airport;
- Refueling was also provided.

Nobody asked questions. Anyway, we would not have answered them. At 0920, I was ordered to fly back and forth towards Tirana via Podgorica/Montenegro for refueling, according to my proposal, and to have required preparations made there by a detachment from the German embassy in Belgrade. It was coordinated by the German MoD and the German Foreign Affairs Department.

At 0950, I forwarded Order Nr. 1 for engagement to the Dubrovnik CP (Command Post); I had staffed it during the flight between Rajlovac and Dubrovnik. At 1050, Lieutenant Colonel Peer Schwan, Military Attaché in Zagreb, got into contact; he had been sent to Dubrovnik by the German Foreign Affairs Department; and he immediately took communications in charge, and further contacts with Croatian authorities.

**Around 1130, the following orders** were forwarded by the *FüZBw*:

**GECONSFOR (L): carry out the evacuation out of Tirana, using Podgorica between 141500A-mar-97-141659A-mar-97, so that German and foreign nationals leave the country. Wait for orders for regrouping.**

Around 1200, a colonel arrived from Bonn; a few days earlier, he was still military adviser to the Albanian government. He had maps with him that we badly needed; and, owing to his deep knowledge of the theater his support happened to be very useful during planning and later on while the mission was being carried out. For this purpose, **units were broken down into three groups** Dubrovnik, Podgorica and Tirana.

Situation information about the town of Tirana was available thanks to the awareness of the former military advisor. Thus, the previously defined AA (Avenue of Approach) was amended shortly before leaving thanks to this information. Without it, the flight path would have overflown standing Albanian anti-aircraft positions.

**Definitive ROEs (Rules of Engagement) arrived only a few minutes before taking off**, just in time to be forwarded to commanders.

At 1130, I sent order Nr. 2 for the mission. In sub-paragraph 3, it was said:

- fly to the area over FORWARD OPERATING BASE PODGORICA with six CH-53 helicopters in three waves;
- land in the vicinity of the US embassy;
- immediately secure the area around the landing zone;
- set up a mobile CP;
- take responsibility for nationals and have them flown out while carrying out protection;
- have nationals immediately flown to Podgorica;
- remove the mobile CP and dismantle the protection disposition once the last nationals have been evacuated;
- And fly back to Podgorica.
- Main effort: nationals board helicopters very rapidly and helicopters stay on the ground as shortly as possible, with no more than one helicopter on the ground simultaneously.

At that time, nationals' boarding was still supposed to be carried out with the support of US personnel in the vicinity of the embassy. When helicopters were assigned, it was important to have the bulk of the command platoon and a large part of the security platoon get off with the first aircraft landing, in order to **be able to immediately command and control the operation from the ground and to secure the evacuation operation**.

Other **security teams** followed in the other 2-5 helicopters, in order to have disembarked security teams available during possible landings. All the security teams were disembarked during the whole operation, except for the two air-gunners on-board each helicopter.

# Foreign studies

## Evacuation

On the other hand, there was **at least one MD (Medical Doctor) in each aircraft**. There were four MDs in the huge-capacity evacuation helicopter, whose landing was expected only in emergency situations and on my order. Two MDs were in the C2 helicopter. During the whole operation, a MD was on the ground alongside me, also operating as an advisor in emergency situations. There were also transmission assets in each helicopter.

Then, the bulk of the command platoon and of the security platoon had to take off with the last helicopter, once helicopters 1-4 had embarked up to 30 civilians.

Intervals between aircraft - that had been ordered while approaching - consisted of three HELITEAMS (Helicopter Teams) of two MTHs (Medium Transport Helicopter) each; time span between two successive teams amounted to ten minutes. The high-capacity helicopter flew with the team in the middle. It was piloted by the flight commander from the AAVN transportation flight. The flight commander had been ordered to take over command and control for this operation, if the command platoon on the ground was no longer able to operate. At 1300, the FüZBw took over command and control. During that time, we achieved the preparation before taking off from Dubrovnik; aircraft were armed, aircrews were aware of their missions and they were already on-board.

At 1335, orders arrived. The situation in Tirana was still unclear. The gist of the last RATEL (Radio-Telephone) directive that I had just received before taking off was:

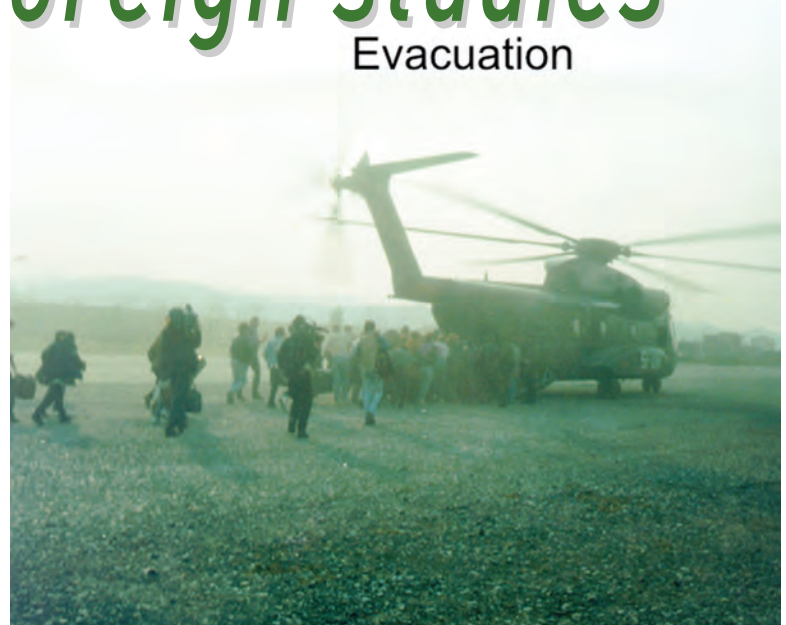
«The local situation is absolutely chaotic, shootings everywhere; nobody knows exactly what is going on. Move to the AA (Assembly Area) and try to be able to evacuate personnel eligible for evacuation. Should the situation become dangerous, disengage».

**At 1350, the C2 helicopter took off in the direction of Podgorica**, and the five other helicopters followed soon after. People's faces were strained but

determined. The pilots and AAVN personnel, accustomed to missions, and without giving up anything owing to this serious situation, considered that it was a sports challenge and their faces were radiant with confidence. Each member of the operational task force was fully aware of the fact that from that time on we were flying towards an area where hazards could no longer be assessed with certainty. But the **overall mood consisted in saying to oneself: we shall do it**.

The approach toward Podgorica lasted about 26 minutes. Keeping a close formation, six helicopters landed onto a lawn located between the runway and the taxiway. Then, it happened that the personnel from the embassy of Belgrade was not there, and in Podgorica they were only vaguely informed of our coming. Communications with the *FüZBw* could be immediately activated. Refueling lasted more than 30 minutes because of the lack of preparation and of the poor state of tank trucks. The Serbs refused credit cards. It happened to be very useful to have brought cash with us.

**In Podgorica, we received a message** informing us that the landing pad in the vicinity of the US embassy was no longer available for safety reasons and that we would no longer be supported by the Americans. From that moment onwards, we were left to ourselves. We looked for an urgent alternative on the city map. On advice from the military adviser, we decided to rejoin Labrak military airport. The overall situation remained unclear. Nobody could say whether militaries were still on this airport. The Podgorica group remained in the rear; it got in touch with the Serbian services and prepared for the flight back. Its action was to be efficient.



### 29 minutes in Tirana

**At 1502, the first HELITEAM took off** – the C2 helicopter and aircraft Nr. 2, heading southward, towards Tirana. **Operation LIBELLULE entered its critical stage**. The approach towards Tirana was made at an altitude higher than 3 000 feet. At 1521, we received a message through the C-160 radio relay informing us that US helicopters had been shot at by anti-aircraft weapons and rockets over Tirana; then they had definitely stopped their operation. The pilot turned round and stared at me. Without a single word, the issue was clear: do we go on or do we abort the mission?

We now had to make a command decision rapidly. For a short while, I had considered changing the approach altitude, in order to rejoin the area at low altitude, and to keep the large-capacity helicopter farther in the rear. An answer to our questions, forwarded by the relay, was that our new landing pad had not been concerned by these barrage fires. Then, it was decided to keep heading and altitude up to the target. At 1539, the pilot moved the stick forward over Labrak; the C2 helicopter shifted to rapid descent flight. Shortly before landing, the aircraft was hit once. We could hear the shock clearly.

**When we received the message informing us of the US operation being discontinued, we obviously wondered whether we were to continue**

**the operation.** However, and first of all, shootings had been suffered in an area far from the anticipated location for our landing, and on the other hand, I considered the risk linked to ground-to-air rockets as small. Even if rioters had got rockets, it was unlikely they could know how to use them. So, I was very dubious about the truthfulness of this message. Later on, it was proved that a helicopter had been shot at with AT (Anti-Tank) rockets. In my opinion, **the most important danger came from the numerous and uncontrollable individual weapon shootings.** But we were not having a touristic flight and we were prepared to use our weapons, if compelled to do so.

When the C2 helicopter was hit while landing, I considered that it was not due to organized resistance, and I considered that this situation could be controlled once on the ground. From that time onwards, all of us were aware of moving in an area with increased hazards, and we agreed with this situation. We were in a situation where anyone who chose the military job could be. After having quitted the aircraft through the rear ramp door, we strongly felt ceaseless shootings that came from all sides.

It increased my determination to carry out boarding as quickly as possible. Security elements immediately set up the appropriate disposition on this site. The very airfield had been abandoned by Albanian forces. Aircraft in a poor state were unattended in hangars. The command platoon immediately got into contact with the *FüZBw*. **Now, we had to have nationals rapidly boarded and to leave the place.** An unexpected and important problem occurred. Roll-call had become more difficult when boarding, as the embassy had lost the allotment list per helicopter that I had forwarded via the *FüZBw*. Personnel eligible for evacuation were regrouped in an anarchic crowd; and 300 to 400 Albanians had mixed with them. There was a great confusion. Part of the personnel eligible for evacuation was in a worrying psychological state and required to be taken in charge. It happened to be quite judicious to have one MD per helicopter.

Once again, **I suddenly found myself in a situation which required making a decision.** I had assumed that the embassy would have had set up the list of personnel eligible for evacuation allotted in four groups of 30 people each, according to my requirement; I had also thought that it had organized everything in such a way that I would only have had to give orders to board helicopters chronologically. There again, we had to **make a decision without delay: thorough checking and allotting people eligible for evacuation by ourselves?**

It would have resulted into staying on the ground for a long time; or, for safety reasons, I would have had to order the first aircraft to take off owing to the risk, depart from the given plan, and – on the radio – require each aircraft to land successively. We had no time available for long discussions with the ambassador. I made the decision in an environment of uninterrupted shooting around us. Even with the risk of boarding a few unauthorized people, I gave priority **to speed.** Furthermore, I assumed that the Albanians that would manage to board the aircraft would mean no risk to us. Therefore, a few Albanians managed to board the first two aircraft. Then, I gave another mission to some elements of the security platoon, who were tasked to identify and repel unauthorized people. From the third helicopter, we were able to check people, because ten minutes were available, owing to intervals between aircraft. At around 1554, there was a short but violent firefighting.

Considering the axis of advance and the behavior of two light wheeled armored vehicles that were getting near our security line and shot, I concluded that **dense fire from individual weapons** from these vehicles aimed to the NEO. In such a situation, and being responsible for the physical integrity of servicemen and personnel eligible for evacuation, the hesitation threshold regarding the use of force was rapidly and abruptly lowered. Firefighting started. 188 shots were fired; it was a grouped fire and these vehicles immediately turned back.

Later on, we had the opportunity to rapidly examine one of these vehicles. We saw 50 to 100 impacts, half of which had pierced the armor. **Our servicemen and personnel eligible for evacuation had not been wounded** during firefighting; we did not know whether the aggressor or anyone else had suffered casualties. It was possibly a commando from the Albanese secret police that had to disperse crowds. But we only had this information later on.

**The action carried out in Tirana lasted 29 minutes,** from the moment when the first aircraft landed to the moment when the last aircraft took off. The return flight towards Podgorica took place without any incident. I ordered the unit to assemble and I took the roll call before reporting to the *FüZBw*. The whole operational task force was in front of me, and the most difficult stage was behind us. The authorities of the Federal Yugoslav Republic checked the nationality of evacuated people by the book. The Albanians that had flown were identified and taken to the border. There was no resistance. Once both C-160 had arrived at 1720, nationals were handed to the Air Force, tasked to transport them to Germany. **The faces of evacuated men and women looked deeply relieved but also exhausted.**

We refueled without any difficulty. Globally, both Serbian authorities and Serbian militaries in Podgorica were quite cooperative. The airport commander was always by my side after my arrival and he put a vehicle at my disposal. Before taking off, I had a long talk with him and I thanked him for his support during this humanitarian mission. It was nearly a friendly conversation between two soldiers by the runway. At the break of twilight, both C-160s took off next to us, with nationals on-board to Germany.

**In all, 99 nationals from 23 countries were evacuated by the Air Force and flown back to Germany.** Ten people flew independently from Podgorica. At 1930, I took off with the last aircraft from Podgorica.

On March 15, in Dubrovnik, we immediately refueled and restored the whole operational capability in the event of a new mission to Tirana; it had been ordered by the *FüZBw* during the flight back to Podgorica. However, on March 15, in the morning, the *FüZBw* informed us that no other mission would take place; he ordered us to be handed over to the command of the theater national commander and to move immediately to Rajlovac.

When landing at Rajlovac, our camp buddies reserved a warm welcome for us, and we were deeply moved, as we were still feeling this real-life event. They has written “Rajlovac, Tirana – we always come back” in big letters on the hangar door. **This operation was completed with the mission report sent to major general Frühhaber.** The theater national commander showed us that he felt relieved about the fact that LIBELLULE was back in

Rajlovac and no one was missing. “Mission completed, no losses”. Beyond true professionalism strikingly shown by headquarters and units during this mission, we had also been very lucky during all the different stages and at the right time.

Still in 1993, there had been a harsh home policy debate about the issue pertaining to the legitimacy of committing German forces out of the territory of the Atlantic Alliance with a military mission. Hardly four years later, the German Chancellor – submitted to a strong pressure imposed by emergency - decided to withdraw some German units from the SFOR detachment in FY (Former Yugoslavia) and to commit them into a national NEO, in order to extract nationals from Albania, a country shaken by riots close to civil war. On the other hand, political authorities had decided to keep this operation secret until it was completed.

**As it happened, the purpose of this operation not only consisted in helping German citizens, but also in evacuating nationals from several other countries.** This operation was carried out within an unclear environment and was partly unsure. This operation was carried out at a time when other countries discontinued their own NEOs, as potential risks appeared to be high. Operation LIBELLULE was not discontinued, because risks were still considered to be acceptable on the German side. A possible armed commitment had been taken into account and cautiously planned by the militaries with great skill. **The OTF performed its tasks with professionalism and great skill.** Challenges for this operation – not enough sleep, emergency pressure, uncertainties towards the situation, chaotic situation at the boarding point, engaging in fire and personal risks – servicemen mastered all these factors and they were quite sturdy. As regards good points, they had nothing to envy our allies, who have been experienced in such missions for a long time.

The *HFüKdo* and the *FüZBw* **perfectly controlled** this operation; i.e. they provided forces with required assets and set the framework, while giving a large freedom of maneuver to the operation commander. Reviews carried out in the theater and decisions made were immediately accepted, in particular during critical periods. Nobody was tempted to go too far with telecommunication assets to impose a decision or to make a remote diagnosis about the situation assumption made by units in the theater. In my opinion, **confidence established** between officers in charge in the *HFüKdo* and the *FÜZBw* and theater commanders was a critical factor. Afterwards, the allies were often astonished by the large **freedom of action** – according to them – provided to the theater commander for such an operation. As it happened, it dealt with **first-rate mission command.**

This operation resulted into **numerous lessons learned** regarding planning and conducting NEOs. The most important weak point was about the fact that the embassy in Tirana was not prepared for such a NEO and it completely exceeded its possibilities. In between, the Special Operations Division within the German Army (Bundeswehr) was tasked to conduct NEOs; it **permanently has an intervention team ready to carry out NEOs**, concerning of risk prevention at national level. NEOs have been planned and scheduled with the support of armed forces in embassies of some countries.

Indeed, this operation had been harmonized with other States, but it was carried out within a purely national framework. **The responsibility for success or failure was only a German responsibility.** In so doing, we had accepted the responsibility for the physical integrity of nationals from other countries with all its consequences. Consent from the Bundestag could be given to us only after the successful completion of the operation, owing to emergency and the requirement to keep the NEO secret. Only the chairmen of parliamentary groups from political parties represented in the Bundestag had been informed before the operation.

**The LIBELLULE flight to Tirana cast new light on changes in the role assigned to the German Federal Republic in the area of international politics.**